

# The Eightfold Path for the Householder

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# About this Book

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## Chapter 5. Right Livelihood

Finally, the third of the steps of virtue is Right Livelihood. What's interesting is that virtue is so infrequently spoken of in our culture, in our modern California culture anyway, because it's Victorian and old and repressive; it needn't be any of those things.

Virtue is on one level a training. It's learning to speak, to act, in our sexual life, in our business life, in our family life — to train to act more consciously, more mindfully, more compassionately. And it takes practice. It is also, quite wonderfully, an expression of our awakening, a foundation of our awakening. You can't awaken if you're involved in killing, lying or stealing. Even in the more subtle levels of it, it's hard to pay attention. Your mind is caught up, busy, and paranoid. So it's a foundation for a clear mind, and the training of it is a foundation for being more mindful. But even more beautifully, it's the expression of an awakened heart and an awakened mind.

What is Right Livelihood? I will say some things about it without defining it completely. I'll say a lot of things. They're traditional teachings and some contemporary associations, and then maybe we can take a little time for discussion, especially if I get through them in relatively reasonable time.

I remember going to a conference recently with the Reverend Cecil Williams. I don't know if any of you have watched him on TV but he's great. He's a black minister of the Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco, who has done all kinds of very wonderful projects in the community and in the state for years. He got up and he spoke. It didn't come from his head. He spoke the way many black ministers are able to do, partly through the culture that allows it or embodies it, but his voice came from a place really deep, and he said to people, "What you need to learn is you need to learn about love." He put it out in such a powerful way. He said, "What I'm talking about is not what love you get, but how much love you give." He said it over and over in his speech in that kind of repetitive way of a preacher, and it was so beautiful. He kept saying it in different ways. "It's not how much love you get; it's how much you give."

I could just end the talk right now. It's really quite beautiful.

What is Right Livelihood? Right Livelihood, like the rest of these aspects of the Eightfold Path, is a path to become happier in our lives and to become enlightened or awakened. There are five aspects.

The first is non-harming. The traditional non-harming means not to take a livelihood that involves weapons, or exploitation, or drugs, or things that hurt people. Not much more to say about it. You can look at it in your life and look at in the society you're around. If you don't do it, great; and if you see other people doing it, and there's a way that you can help it not to happen, do it. It's pretty simple. That's non-harming.

The second part of Right Livelihood is an appropriate happiness. There is a sutra from the Buddha that talked about appropriate happiness in Right Livelihood; First is the "having." It's essential to have a trade or a career. Even if you change it five times in your life, that doesn't matter. But to feel decent about yourself, it's really important or helpful — I don't care how much money you have or what you have to do or don't have to do — to have some way of contributing to society, because you're not happy if you don't contribute. So to find a trade or a livelihood or a career; maybe you use it for a while and then you change it. There's a happiness or a joy in having a career or having work that you can do. And if you haven't found it, it's really a crucial part of spiritual practice to look for it. It doesn't mean it's going to be some big special thing.

There's a mythology in our country that is false. It tells you that you can have whatever job you want; anyone who grows up here can be president — God spare you — and that you will find just the right job and it will make you happy, the perfect job for you, the one where your creativity and all your talents are used, and so forth. That is the same American myth like the one of the perfect relationship. I don't know how many of you are still looking for that. Is there anyone who hasn't gotten that one yet? Okay, you got that one. It's true about jobs too; there is not the perfect job. I had the perfect job, traveling around the world to glamorous places, getting a lot of care and respect, relating to people on issues of Dharma and meditation, sitting together. It really was wonderful. I got tired sometimes. People came and they called me in the middle of the night. There were things I didn't like about it. Plus which I couldn't have a house and I didn't settle down until recently. So I gave it up to teach in a different way because it wasn't as perfect as I thought it would be. It seemed perfect. It was wonderful.

There is no perfect relationship and there is no perfect job. Find one, or something, and really give yourself to it; that's a happiness. Secondly, there's a happiness in producing from the job, which is basically to make money. It's both producing goods or services for other people, which

we'll get to, but it's also in having things and using them. And as householders, money is necessary, and it's fine, and that's part of our dharma, of our way of being in the world. And to have a career or to find some way to work, even if it's your career for a year or several years, and then to use it to create a home or to create the financial things that are appropriate for you, is great; it's really wonderful.

Also, in terms of being happy, there is a wide range to "using". It can be using in a very simple way or it can be using in a more extravagant way. You're not so happy if it's based on a lot of indulgence. Not that you shouldn't do it, you're welcome to try it, but the people I know who have tried it for awhile found it not so satisfying. So there's a happiness in having a career and work, and in producing and using the things that come from it, including one's money.

The third happiness is to be free from debt. That's a good one for our country, isn't it? Funny, it was said 2,500 years ago. It seems to still be true because you worry and you're anxious, and you struggle, and it really has to do with contentment. See if you can learn fundamentally or basically to live within your means.

I'm just going to put this stuff out about Right Livelihood. You can do what you want with it. It's not commandments or anything like that; it's suggestions. It says, "Wake up to these different areas of your life; that you're happier if you live within your means, and that people who don't, find themselves unhappy.

Frankly, if you've ever lived in a Third World country or some simple situation for awhile, you discover you don't need one-quarter of what you think you do to be happy. You can live with a lot less than you think you can. And you can be as happy watching a sunset or taking a walk as having an extravagant night out on the town because you know how to relate to those things.

The third happiness is freedom from debt, "having and using," and the fourth is being free from blame or fault in your livelihood, from your work; that you do it not to please the world around you or because of what people will think, but you let it somehow come from inside; that what you choose, and where your actions come from, are not from how they look, because after a while you get caught by that, and you get into pain and sorrow, but that you start to reference inwardly to what matters and what you care about, and that affects your livelihood and your work.

The third aspect of Right Livelihood is growth and awareness; that you can use your livelihood to grow in consciousness.

You know, it's so interesting. We get very identified with our jobs in this country. We meet someone and one of the first things we ask is:

“Well, what do you do?” That is what we want to know about somebody. “Oh, I’m a psychologist, I’m a meditation teacher, I’m a nurse, I’m a librarian, I’m a waitress.” You’re all therapists, I know. “I’m a” — whatever it happens to be — “businessman.” It’s so interesting, when you go to India, nobody ever asks you what you do. It’s a very different culture. As far as I can tell, in India nobody does anything. You meet someone, and there’s this baba kind of person sitting at the tea stand, and he’s been there for awhile, and you talk to him. They don’t ask you what you do. They might ask you what form of God you worship; is it Krishna or Shiva or Kali or Durga or Buddha, or whoever it happens to be, but it’s not a big thing in that culture to know what you do. It’s much more about how many children you have or what form of God you worship.

It’s a big thing for us, “What do you do?” It’s what we choose in this particular drama. We picked to be born in America somehow. “Alright, I’ll sign up for one there,” and then in the script of living in America, it’s what you do that is a big thing. Okay, do something decent, alright? But it’s important to remember that it’s part of the theater.

With growth and awareness, the first thing is you don’t need to be too identified with what you do. We think what we do is who we are. When you die you aren’t going to be who you are, you’re going to be something else, or when you get sick, or when things change around, or when the earthquake comes, or whatever, what you do isn’t going to matter a lot; it’s something that you do. You can do it instead in a spirit of adventure or a dance or an exploration.

Don Juan was talking to Carlos Casteneda about the qualities of being a warrior. In this place he is training him to be a hunter in the wilds but also a hunter of knowledge. He said:

*I told you already, to be inaccessible as a hunter does not mean to hide or to be secretive. It doesn’t mean that you cannot deal with people either. A hunter uses their world sparingly and with tenderness regardless of whether the world might be things or plants or animals or people or power. A hunter deals intimately with their world and yet they remain inaccessible to that same world.*

Carlos as usual says, “I don’t understand.” There’s a contradiction, it makes no sense. How can you be inaccessible if you’re there in your world day after day?

*“You did not understand.” says Don Juan patiently. “A hunter is inaccessible because they’re not squeezing their world out of shape. They tap it lightly, stay for as long as they need to, and then move away leaving hardly a mark.”*

What a lovely way to think of it. It’s to live lightly on the earth, to take what we do, and use it, and care for it, to be tender, to be careful with it, but not to get so identified or so caught up in it.

There are a lot of ways that one can begin to bring awareness to one’s work. There are the simple ones of exercises. For example, Gurdjieff used to give awareness training exercises where he’d tell people to do things in a different way than they were used to. Tie your shoes and do the bow around the other direction, or open your car door with your left hand instead of your right hand, and let it be a signal for a little while, maybe for two minutes, that you’re going to wake up and you’ll go off automatic pilot and be conscious as the door opens and you sit down in the car and you begin to drive. It becomes a meditation.

Bring that kind of thing into your work. Do things a little differently; do them backwards. Use your meditative awareness or mindfulness to start to make the work that you do a meditation. Especially after these hours of training in monasteries, where you just walk back and forth doing walking meditation, and then you sit down, and then you walk some more, I’ve often thought, “Gee, I could be on an assembly line somewhere and get enlightened because it looks like the same thing, if I did it right.” And I worked on an assembly line once at the Beacon Gauge Company, putting these screws into this little part, into a gauger. It was not very different than what I did in the monastery, except that everyone there was resenting being there and waiting for their paycheck, or stoned on Quaaludes, or whatever got them through the day.

Growth and awareness means that we can begin to use our work, whatever it is, to wake up, to awaken. To do that requires some discipline. For many people it requires a lot of discipline and a lot of repetition.

Discipline and repetition in work. Most every kind of work that you do, whether it’s as an artist, or as a therapist, or as a mechanic, or whatever kind of business thing that you do, will have repetition and boredom. One way to react is to put yourself on automatic pilot and go to sleep. Sometimes it’s useful. I’m not saying that automatic pilot doesn’t have its place in our life. But it’s possible to begin to use it more as a discipline, to begin to awaken in some fashion, to be willing to take it as your meditation.

I ask you a question, to reflect: What could you do in your work

more meditatively? How could you bring more mindfulness into the particular work that you do? You can start to look at that. It might be little ways of how you open the door, it might be in ways where you take a pause between people you see, and promise yourself that you'll just sit there at your desk or at your place for a minute or five between people that you deal with and get centered again on your breath. It might be in regard to this next thing or the next two things of Right Livelihood which I'll come to.

The first was non-harming, the second was appropriate happiness, the third is to begin to use it to wake up. You can do walking meditation, you can work with your breath, you can do meditation as a mechanic, you can do meditation as a doctor or a nurse, by paying attention to your body, to your posture, to your heart, to your mind states, to your moods. You can start to listen. Then maybe you can answer Cecil Williams' question as you go along through the day. It's not how much love you get but how much you give.

The fourth is simplicity. It's a little hard to talk about in Marin County. Maybe it is in our whole culture. I'll do my best, okay?

Ryokan, the old Zen poet, says:

*My hut lies in the middle of a dense forest.  
Every year the green ivy grows longer.  
Not much news of the affairs of men,  
only the occasional song of a woodcutter.  
The sun shines and I mend my robe  
when the moon comes out I read Buddhist poems.  
I have nothing to report, my friend.  
If you want to find the true meaning,  
stop chasing after so many things.*

What a nice poem. That which we seek, which we long for most deeply in our hearts, doesn't come from so much complexity or chasing around. It really comes from being in touch with ourselves, with listening, with feeling, with awareness. Simplicity!

There's a beautiful and contemporary movement of Right Livelihood that has been sparked by Gandhi teaching people to spin and live more simply in India, and it's been picked up by people like Schumacher, who wrote the book on *Small is Beautiful and Buddhist Economics*. And there's a lovely foundation called The Friends of Right Livelihood Foundation who offer an alternative Nobel Prize each year in Stockholm



the day before the Nobel Prize is offered, not quite as much money. But the people that they've had win it and for what reasons are just beautiful. Some of the winners in the past were Stephen Gaskin from the farm who started his own Peace Corps which now goes to about a half dozen countries in the Caribbean and Africa with medical services and agricultural things; or Mike Cooley, who's a person in charge of the Air Space Workers at Lucas Air Space Factory. He did a brilliant thing. He got a plan together that's very wonderful. He asked all the chief scientists to look at what the military/industrial factories and complexes could make to serve the world rather than destroy it. They couldn't think of anything. Not very much came out of them. So then he asked all the people who worked for them, all the workers in the factories, and got some groups in different factories around England, and came out with a thousand wonderful suggestions of things that those skills and those factories could make that would be an alternative to building weapons. Or a man named Bill Mallison, who is a founder of Permaculture, which is a whole new much more sensitive agricultural system, particularly in Australia, and it is starting to be spread around the Third World. There's a whole list of people like that who started to make their livelihood and their relationship to work somehow connected with the sense of living lightly on the earth, of living with some care or some tenderness.

It's a very beautiful thing, this quality of simplicity, of seeing that we don't need as much as we thought we did to be happy, and really asking yourself the question: "What do I really, really want?" or "What would I want when I'm old and I look back, what will I have cared about?" or "What do I care about for this world that I live in?" Some sense of our connectedness with it.

And that leads to the last of these aspects of Right Livelihood which is Service, and in some ways the most beautiful of all — seeing that what we do is totally interconnected with the rest of life, of discovering our connectedness, and seeing that the world is entrusted to us somehow. It's our planet and it's entrusted.

Ram Dass one time asked his teacher, Neem Karoli Baba Maharaji, what his teaching was, and he said that his whole teaching was, "Love people and feed them;" that was all.

It's so nice at intensive meditation retreats that I've taught so often to watch the people who come and volunteer to cook, because they're not cooking in a restaurant in order to get their paycheck and kind of get the stuff out and get home and do something more interesting. The people come there to cook because they want to, because they like to cook, and they want to support people's practice, and their sitting, and their retreat. And there's so much caring. A pan of food goes out and there's flowers

on it, or there's some decoration, or there's something that's done to it, or just the way that it's cooked. Sometimes they'll just sing when they cook, as a way to let that very simple act of cooking, which we all do, become an expression of caring, of service. We can do that in our work. There are fifty little ways that one can be mindful in service.

In a very nice book by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh called *The Miracle of Mindfulness* — it's the best book that I know of on mindfulness in daily life — he said that his teacher gave him a whole series of little exercises.

For example, when he washed his hands, he would recite this thing, "As I clean my hands, so too may I bring the cleanliness or purity of heart to all the people that I meet today." Or, "As I drive in the traffic, may I wish well on all the other people that I meet, that I pass by." It's a very different relationship. I've sat on buses. You sit in your cocoon. You're reading, or whatever, and everyone else has got their book or their paper, and they're in their little cocoon, and you don't want to be too connected. Then I sat there and I've looked up, and without being too obvious or hokey about it, I just started to do loving-kindness meditation, looking around, since I'm not doing anything but daydreaming anyway, or planning, which is worse, and I start to think, "May I be happy and peaceful," or whatever, and then I look around in an unobvious way, "May all these people be happy." I let myself be tuned into them. Some of them are bent over with suffering and sorrow, and some are teenagers who are just kind of booming with energy or with aggression, or whatever it happens to be. Some are happy and some are sad. I just send each one of them a little loving-kindness. It totally changes your relationship to the bus trip completely. You get off that bus and it's like you just took a trip to India to some wonderful ashram. It's true if you do it because you feel connected with the world and the people around you.

That's the spirit of service. It can be in giving what you actually do, because any kind of livelihood, as long as it's not harming, is a fine one. It really is. We need it all. We need farmers, we need plumbers. As I've said in retreats, "I'd much rather live in San Francisco with no doctors than with no plumbers." It's a very crucial thing. And we're all needed together and we all find something to do for awhile. It's beautiful. You can see it as well, "I do it to get through the night or the day, and get my money" or "I'm going to do this thing and awaken and serve, even if I'm a plumber or I'm doing something that may seem at first mundane, I'm going to use it to serve."

You know how nice it is to have somebody who is your waiter or waitress, or at the checkout counter at the supermarket, or the person

who comes to fix your refrigerator in your house, be a nice human being who cares when they do their work, both about their work and about you. It's like the Buddha walks in and says, "Hey, I'm going to fix your refrigerator today but really I'm the Buddha. I'm just here in the guise of a refrigerator repair person." They say a few nice things to you and remind you that you can love the world around you a little bit more, and you can awaken, and they fix the refrigerator and go off. What a fantastic thing! We each have that capacity to bring that kind of light to the work we choose.

Zen Master Soen-Sa-Nim — who now has temples all around the country, ten or fifteen Zen centers — when he first came to this country he knew no one, and he wanted to teach Zen. After talking at Brown University, he got a job in Providence to support himself. He was a Zen Master in Korea and quite famous and had many disciples, and he wanted to teach in America. He didn't speak English very well. The only job he could get was to work in a laundromat, mopping the floors and fixing the machines when they broke down. So there's this guy with a bald head, in a gray robe, down there cleaning up the laundromat. Students from the university who would come down to the laundromat got curious. "Who is this strange guy down there?" They talked to him. "I Zen teacher." He still doesn't speak such good English. And they said, "Yeah?" He said, "Yeah." After a while people started to come down and hang out in his laundromat. This is a true story. They would really get interested in who this guy was and what he taught. Then they started to come up to his apartment and he taught them how to sit Zen meditation. He would go to the laundromat and leave them sitting there, and so forth. Gradually it switched around and over the last 12 years he has many Zen centers and many hundreds of students. That was a fine thing to do.

There's a beautiful whole chapter in the *Bhagavad Gita* on Karma Yoga.

*I've already told you, in this world — says Krishna —  
aspirants may find enlightenment in two different paths.  
For the contemplative, there's the path of knowledge,  
and for the active there's the path of selfless action.  
Freedom from activity is never achieved by abstaining from  
action.*

*Nobody can become perfect by merely ceasing to act.  
In fact, nobody can rest from their activity, even for a moment.  
All are helplessly forced to act by the movement of life.*

*Do Your dharma, your work.*

*Do your duty always, but without attachment  
This is how a person reaches the truth,  
by working without anxiety about results.  
The ignorant work for the fruit of their actions,  
the wise must work also but without desire or attachment,  
pointing their feet in the path of the Dharma,  
giving their heart to it,  
working without attachment.  
Let them show by example  
how work is true practice.*

The whole chapter in the *Bhagavad Gita*, is about beginning to use our work through the path of selfless action. It's not how much you get that makes you happy; it's how much you give.

I want to end with a guided Don't move, stay where you are. It doesn't require sitting up or anything. Let your eyes close for a second. Actually, it will just be a minute or two. Let yourself picture the place where you work. See it, or sense it, or feel it, or if it's not where you work, then where you go to school, if that's what you do, or if not that, then the place where you live if you don't work right now. For most people it will be the place where you work.

There are two questions we're going to ask: One is: How can I make this work more conscious?" And the other: How can I make it more of a loving service? In the place where you work, the Buddha or the Bodhisattva of Awareness, Manjushri, has left a gift for you. It's a box, and you'll discover it there at your place of work. Let yourself sense it, or see it, or know where it is, and go over to it. When you find this gift from the Buddha of how to make your work more conscious, inside the box will be a clear symbol of something that you can do, a very clear symbol of how to make your work more conscious for yourself.

Let yourself open the box and be aware of what that gift is, this symbol of how to make your work more conscious. Let yourself know it, or see it, or sense it. If it's not clear to you, then there's a light switch over on the wall. Turn it on. Bring a little more light into the box. You'll be able to see it. The Buddha leaves very good gifts for you. Just the right thing. If you need a little explanation of how to do it, in the bottom of the box you'll find a little note left by the Buddha. Pick it up and you'll hear, or see, or know. It will say two or three words, just what you need to learn, what the symbol stands for.

There is a second gift left for you. Stay at your work-place. This gift was left by the Bodhisattva of Compassion. It's left just at the place where you work. There's another wonderful package, and it's the answer to the questions: How can I make this work more of a loving service? What do I need to do or how can I do it? What must I remember? So let yourself find that gift, whatever way you need to, and open this package left by the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Let yourself see it clearly. If it's not clear, then take it over to the window and let the sunlight stream into it. You'll see it, a clear symbol of how to make your work a service of love.

If you need any more information, look in the bottom of the box, and there will be a note again with two or three words on it that will tell you, explain what it is or how to use it.

Then just stay inside for a moment. I'll ask you a few questions and you can just let the answers come out of your own heart. The questions are: How can I begin to discover or continue to discover peace and harmony where I am at work, just where I am? How can I begin to discover the Dharma or truth within this work, just where I am?

Let yourself finish up and gently let your eyes open and come back when you're ready. You know, you can work and treat each person you meet as somebody else to deal with in your work, or you could treat each person you meet as your brother or your sister, or you could do what Mother Teresa does in her work and treat each person you meet as Jesus, and care for them, and wash their feet, or love them, or do whatever you do in the same way you might love Jesus or the Buddha.

You can work on one day and just get through the day or the night. And you can work on another day and have each person that comes to you, and each person you meet, be a place where your heart really opens, and where you share a love and a caring and a tenderness.

I close with reading this last thing again from Don Juan. It's actually Don Genaro, who is the most playful of them. He says:

*Genaro's love is the world. He was just now embracing this enormous earth, but since he's so little, all he can do is swim on it. But the earth knows that Genaro loves it and it bestows on him its care and that's why Genaro's life is filled to the brim, and his state wherever he'll be will be plentiful.*

*Only if one loves this earth, this life, with unbending passion can one release one's sadness. Warriors are always joyful because their love is unalterable and their beloved, the earth*

*embraces them and bestows upon them inconceivable gifts.*

*Only love of this splendrous life can give freedom to a warrior's spirit, and his freedom is joy, efficiency, and abandon in the face of any odds. That's the last lesson. It's always left for the very last moment, for the moment of ultimate solitude.*

*When a person faces death and aloneness, only then does it make sense.*

*Only if one loves this earth and this life with unbending passion can one release one's sadness.*

So those are some thoughts or reflections on Right Livelihood.